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ABSTRACT

Conducted in 1955 and 1980, random sample interview data of 17 to 28 year-old West Germans from places of less than 5,000 inhabitants are used to support the thesis that the post-adolescent phase has been prolonged in the countryside of West Germany during these years of increasing technical and economic development. Findings indicate occupational adult positions are acquired later, while family adult positions are acquired earlier than 25 years ago, with young people leaving home earlier and more radically. A long period of post-adolescence promotes social change when long-term juveniles question goals and values of society and search for alternate behavior patterns. These young adults are open to innovations and have progressive ideas about marriage, family, and the positions of wives. Contemporary rural young adults with a long post-adolescence are more interested in political affairs and are more frequently attracted to progressive political parties. If this period is experienced positively, new ideas and constructive efforts toward further development can be expected. If this period is negative, evidence of resignation or aggression from young people can result. (NEC)

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The Post-Adolescent Phase

a By-product and a Factor of Development

by

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I. Youth, a socio-economic phenomenon

1 In all the known human societies, life is divided into defined periods. The threshold from childhood to youth is, usually, defined biologically by the entrance into puberty, while the transition from adolescence to adult status is socially defined. For that reason it is more variable. Youth is sociologically defined by the fact, that a person no longer plays the roles of a child, but does not yet fill the position of an adult. Youth means, therefore, the transition period between childlike immaturity and social maturity. There are no generally binding criterions for social maturity. Each society defines social maturity according to its own system. The earlier one needs new blood for labour and citizens, the less youth time one concedes to the rising generation; and conversely the longer one wants to exclude young people from influential positions, the more one prolongs their youth period, mostly by way of prolonging their education. It follows from that that juveniles, who aspire higher positions, ara arrested in the youth period for a longer time than those who are satisfied or who have to be content with lower positions. Like the independent professional positions, the higher positions as an employee in industry or public services require as a rule a relatively long period of training or waiting-time.

2 Since technical progress shortens the working time required for production of goods and services, there is a long-term tendency in all industrialized societies to extend the youth period. One of the main problems in both developed and less developed countries is to distribute fairly the decreasing amount of paid labour amongst a growing number of persons. This can be done through shortening the daily or weekly working time, multiplying the yearly holidays, lowering the retirement age, and postponing the entrance age into occupation. The latter measure is in use in all those countries where a surplus of adult labour exists. Prolongation of compulsory school attendance and extension of vocational training answer this purpose.But usually, measures of this kind are founded with the argument that the domination of modern technologies requires more basic knowledge and a longer, specialised training. It is, furthermore, assured that the longer and therefore better educated people have better chances of getting a job at all or reaching higher professional postions. In fact youth

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unemployment decreases with higher educational level. In order to diminish youth unemployment which is very undesirable for humanitarian and political reasons, the prolonged youth period is often filled with educational and training programs. This should, however, not obscure the fact that youth is often misused as a buffer on the labour market. In other words: If the supply of relatively cheap labour is scarce, one employs juveniles. If, on the contrary, the demand is smaller than the supply, then a longer youth period is "generously" granted to the young people.

3 It should, indeed, not be overlooked that the prolonged youth period caused by technical progress and the desolate situation on the labour market is intensified by the desire of many adolecents to postpone as long as possible the "earnestness of life" which is combined with taking possession of responsible positions at work and at home. Such a "life of pleasure" is only possible for the majority of young people under favourable economic conditions as in rich industrialized countries and welfare states, whereas in the poor countries it is usually necessary for adolescents and children to contribute early to the livelihood of their families by working. There is, therefore, a close relationship between the duration and pattern of the youth period and the state of development of the national economy.

4 A mostly overlooked by-product of the socio-economic development is the prolongation or even the coming into existence of a special period of life between childhood and adulthood. In many primitive, less developed societies, this phase is very short, limited to the preparatory training for the initiation rites which rather abruptly lead over from childhood to an adult status. Also in many agrarian societies in which no ceremonies accompany the passing over from childhood to adult positions, a life period distinguished by juvenile patterns of behaviour is missing. Boys and girls are involved in the daily work as soon as they become able to work. Girls are mostly married soon after reaching puberty. Early marriages at the age of 14 to 16 years are in some cultures more the rule than the exception. Collaboration in the parents' household and holding is a matter of course but often an economic necessity too. The prohibition of child labour often fails because of the existent economic compulsions and traditions. The general prohibition of child labour and the safety provisions for young workers are sometimes more an expression of acknowledgement to the conventions worked out by the International Labour Office in Geneva than actual, intensified norms of behaviour.

II. Adolescence and post-adolescence

5 Since values always dictate norms of behaviour, values also stay back to the prohibition of child labour and safety provisions for young workers. It is mainly a question of the value of a healthy human development both physically and mentally, but also of an unburdened, happy childhood and a youth at liberty. In western societies like Germany, youth has a high value in itself. Contrary to many traditional societies, mainly eastern ones, where the wisdom of aged people is regarded as the most precious fruit of human life, in western societies the liveliness of youth enjoys the highest position. A special feeling of happiness is attributed to being and remaining young. That has much to do with the high value of sporting performances and physical fitness. These values are propagated worldwide by the western inspired mass media.

6 The prolonged youth phase has led to classification problems which are solved by subdivision of this life period into the real adolescence and the post-adolescence. Members of the post-adolescence phase are called young adults. In Western Germany, most of the young persons finish their adolescence phase at the age of 17 till 18 years. The legislator accommodates this circumstance by giving some rights to persons over 18 years of age which the youngsters do not yet possess, and some duties like military service. Reaching full age does not automatically mean becoming an adult. Adulthood, i. e. to be fully acknowledged as an adult, presumes the taking over of certain occupational and family positions like employment , businessman, spouse, father, mother, lodger, house-owner.

III. Youth in the changing countryside of Western Germany

7 The thesis, that the post-adolescence phase was prolonged in the countryside during the technical and economic development, shall be proved using the data of a representative survey of people from 17 to 28 years of age residing in rural areas[1]) of the Federal Republic of Germany. For this reason a sample was drawn at random and interviewed in 1955 and 1980. The countryside had changed during this period more than ever before. For instance, the work on farms, in workshops and households was mechanized. Thereby the produvtivity of labour increased enormously. The proportion of farmers decreased to less than 10 % of the rural population. The majority of rural residents now commute to towns and plants in the neighborhood for work. The rural occupational and social structure has been fundamentally changed due to the altered occupational structure. Regarding the social change the question arises whether the situation of rural youth has also changed or not.

8 The war-time and the hard time after World War II retarded the liberation of the adolescents from heavy work. One can say this generation has been cheated out of their youth. They had to work very hard on the farms. A German researcher observed in a wine growing village in 1952 that scholars had to work for 3 to 6 hours daily during winter and for 9 to 14 hours in summertime (SEITERICH 1953). Ten years later, researchers still found kinds of child-work injurious to health. Meanwhile child-labour almost disappeared in rural areas. Three factors contributed to this progress: (1) Family farms which were excepted from the child protection law decreased in number. Most of the children grow up nowadays in families not running their own enterprise. (2) Many activities which were done by children in former times are now performed by machines. (3) School attendance and job training take more time. Furthermore, in a leisure-orientated society like the German one it is publicly disapproved if scholars do not have a normal amount of leisure time. Children and adolescents have a social claim to a youth phase free of gainful work.

IV. Age of attainment of adult status

9 What about the post-adolescence phase in rural areas or to express it more precisely: how adolescents do become adult persons? The finishing of vocational training and the entry into professional work as well as leaving the parental home, the running of one's own home and the foundation of one's own family are regarded as important stages of this process. - In the foreground of my investigation stood the question at which age the various stages are reached. If there are differences according to sex, I distinguished between male and female persons. It is possible by a temporal comparison to answer the question whether the post-adolescence phase has been shortened or prolonged during the period from 1955 to 1980.

10 The first important step on the way to becoming adult is from being a learner to being a practitioner. Four-fifths of the cohorts interviewed in 1955 made this step under 19 years of age. This quota had been halved by 1980. Not until the age of 28 years all men are practising a profession. Women take this step on average earlier because they aim at a lower professional level, and house-keeping competes with job performing. If we consider house-keeping equal to practising a profession, nearly all rural women at the age of 25 or 26 years have finished the learning phase and have entered adult positions. But in 1980 (as distinguished from 1955) one-third of the men aged 27-28 and one-seventh of the women of the same age consider their occupational training as not yet finished, although they are already employed. Most of them aspire becoming a foreman or acquiring a diploma.

11 It is evident that not only have the courses of instruction been extended, but also the percentage of persons has increased who undertake a longer occupational training. 5 % of the total sample interviewed in 1955 were still in training as opposed to 32 % in 1980. This fact corresponds with an enormous increase in

[1]) Operationally defined as places of less than 5.000 inhabitants.

higher education in the countryside. In 1955, about 1o % of an age-group moved to secondary schools, 6o % in 198o. But also the attendance of occupational schools increased. More than 9o % of the younger generation acquire vocational training. At least every second young farmer and every seventh young farmer's wife aspires to the master degree in agriculture[1]). Three-quarters of the future farmers attend a higher vocational school.

12 Leaving one's parent's home can be described as a social, ideal or financial step. During the period under record (1955-198o) in particular the parental guardianship and the financial dependency diminished. Although 6o % of the respondents are living in their parent's home, 8o % are financially independent. The young people in rural Western Germany are at 17 on average allowed to go out and come home whenever they want to. Most juveniles older than 17 years are free to do what they like during their free time. They usually spend the evenings together with friends of the same age outside the home. Four out of five adolescents are allowed to make important decisions by themselves, but 6o % ask their parents for advice. The financial independency is primarily the result of their own income either through occupation or educational grants. The rate of financial independency increases with age. Parents bear the expenses of maintenance of

45 % of 17-19 years old
12 % of 2o-22 years old
3 % of 23-25 years old
2 % of 26-28 years old sons and daughters.

An important factor of financial independency from parents is, of course, to get married, especially for women, because the liability for maintenance passes from the father to the husband. 63 % of the women interv...ed in 198o received their maintenance from their husband's earnings.

13 The final step in the process of leaving home and the attainment of the adult status is to set up house for oneself. During the period under record (1955-198o), children have left home at an increasingly younger age (figure 1). In 198o one-quarter of the men aged 21.3 years, one half of the men aged 24.6 years, and three-quarters of the men aged 26.8 years ran their own home. The female respondents reached this status on average two years earlier (the corresponding figures are 19.7, 21.1 and 24.7 years). One-quarter of the men is alreadyan owner of a house or dwelling at the age of 26.o years. Roughly half o the women reach this goal at the age of 26.7 years. In many villages a remarkable growth of prestige is connected with the ownership of a house. Living in one's own home is one of the most important characteristics of rural existence. JEGGLE (1975, p. 71) observed in a Swabian village: "Without being a home-owner one never becomes a parish councillor, one is regarded as a failure".

14 An "accomplished" adult is, however, only such a person who combines a performing position in business or house-keeping with a responsible family position, i. e. who is married. This combination was (198o) in existence according to s... at the age of:

Status	Male respondents				Female respondents			
	19	22	25	28	19	22	25	28
	years of age				years of age			
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
married with finished vocational training	1	8	3o	41	12	49	72	81
other status	99	92	7o	49	88	51	28	19
Total	1oo	1oo	1oo	1oo	1oo	1oo	1oo	1oo

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[1]) Master in the sense of a foreman, not on an academic level.

It seems to me remarkable that only two-fifths of the men at the age of 28 years but four-fifths of the women at the same age reached this full adult status. The average marriage age dropped in the German countryside during the period under record. It was in 1955 still considerably higher than the urban average. The fact that young people now marry earlier in rural areas means primarily an approximation to the usual behaviour in Germany. But furthermore, the proportion of such rural categories which marry relative late by tradition, namely the farmers, diminished. The former rigid link between marriage and the transfer of the farm to the successor no longer exists. Therefore, there is no obstacle for young farmers to marry as early as other young men, apart from the great difficulty in finding a girl at all who is willing and able to become a farmer's wife.

V. Socio-psychological consequences of prolonged youth

15 My investigation in Western Germany shows that on the one hand occupational adult positions are acquired later, while on the other hand family adult positions are acquired earlier than 25 years ago. Taking into consideration the field of housing one comes to the conclusion that young people leave home earlier and more radically than 25 years ago, and that a majority of young rural adults provide themselves with a certain amount of freedom during their post-adolescence period in which they escape almost all social control.

16 The technical and economic development is not only one of the main causes for the extension of adolescence and the post-adolescence period but a long post-adolescence period also becomes a factor of the socio-cultural change. A relatively extended post-adolescence period effects the psychological development of young people (see FISCHER e.a., 1981). It is, of course, of decisive importance whether this period is experienced as an apprentice, a student or as an unemployed person; mainly as a period of trouble and frustration or as time of amusement and success. The duration of the post-adolescence period is of socio-cultural importance too. The longer this period lasts the more pronounced the youth culture is. Since essential impulses go out from the sub-culture of youth to the entire culture of the society, and individuals are very strongly influenced for their whole life by their youth culture, a long period of post-adolescence promotes the social change wh a short or missing one supports tradition. Life designs of short term juveniles are mostly very conventional, orientated to the careers of the elder generation. Long-term juveniles often question the goals and values of the society, and search for alternative behaviour patterns in movements like the movement for freedom, the "green movement", or liberation movements.

17 Short-term juveniles are more frequently adult-orientated, while long-term juveniles are more frequently youth-orientated. That means fundamentally different attitudes. As FISCHER e. a. (1981, p. 18 f) found, youth-orientated people communicate in another way with adults; they provoke and avoid them. They distrust every authority, the religious authorities as well as political and family ones. They take more risks, and can, therefore, more frequently suffer personal failure. One can often meet them living in unconventional dwelling and living communities. They participate frequently in protest movements, and are attracted by revolutionary political parties. Especially descendants of the upper middle class with higher education and prolonged youth time tend towards a resistance against conventional life plans, especially middle class designs.

18 The German rural youth survey of 1980 also proved significant differences between young people with short and long youth time. Rural juveniles with a long post-adolescence are more interested in political affairs and are more frequently attracted to progressive political parties. Their life perspectives are rather short-termed, and they more frequently follow their emotions than their reflections. They are open to innovations but have a less positive proficiency drive. They have progressive ideas about marriage, family, and the positions of wives. They more frequently reject authoritarian power structure but they follow more critically the governmental policiy; they regard the growth of power of parties, banking, compa-

nies, administration bureaucracy, security police, labour unions etc. as a danger for the liberty of the individual. As the ratio of long-term juveniles in rural areas compared to the rural youth as a whole increased, so a parallel increase in self-confidence, the educational level, the range of experience, the critical attitude and the level of aims occured.

19 Hence it follows that the forces which change the social system and develop the society are promoted by a prolongation of the youth period. It is, however, very important wether this period is experienced as a successful culmination of life or as a "surplus generation". In the first case new ideas and constructive efforts towards further development can be expected. In the latter case, one can count on resignation or aggression from the young people; both are equally bad for the society. It is up to the elder generation, and especially to the leading and ruling forces in politics and industry to give the young generation a fair chance not to be a burden but a useful part of society.

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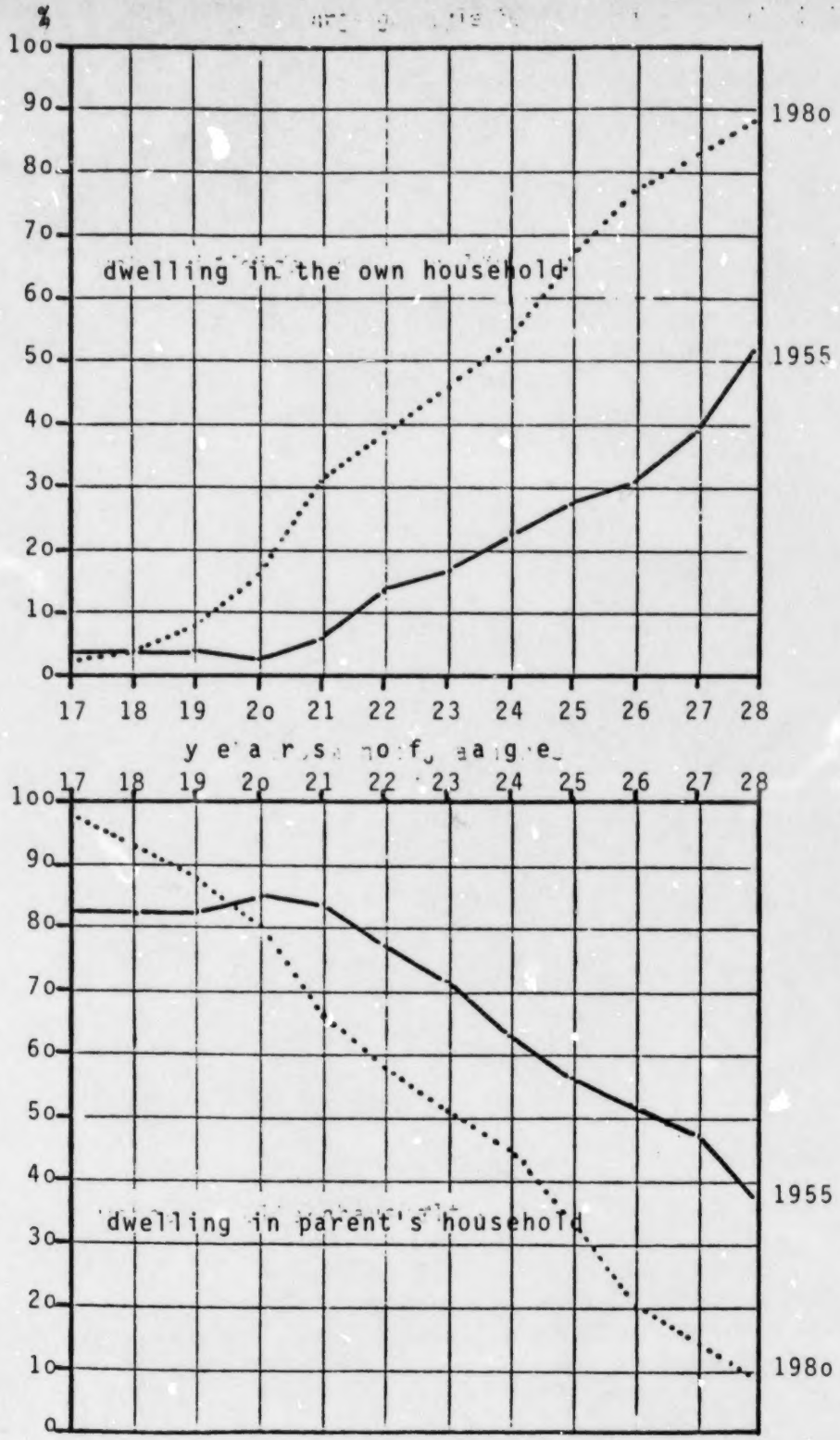

Figure 1: Dwelling status of rural adults at the age of 17 - 28 years, Western Germany